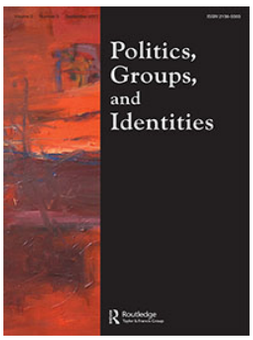

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Bringing "T" to the table: understanding individual support of transgender candidates for public office*

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ABSTRACT

Of central importance to groups is the representation of their interests in government. A direct strategy for representation is to elect officials that identify with the group. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement has increasingly been successful in fielding LGB candidates for local, state, and national offices, even though these candidates face barriers. But while many lesbian and gay candidates have achieved electoral success, few transgender candidates have run for office and even fewer have won. Our project examines the hurdles faced by transgender candidates and provides a predictive analysis of a unique 2015 national survey that queried American adult respondents about hypothetical transgender candidates for different political offices. We hypothesize that although transgender candidates are likely to be opposed by potential voters that would also oppose female, African-American, or gay or lesbian candidates, for transgender candidates, there is a stronger influence of respondent disgust sensitivity and gender nonconformity. The findings largely support our arguments. We conclude that transgender candidates are in a similar electoral position to gay and lesbian candidates, with likely supporters fitting a profile that is similar to the Democratic voter base. We discuss the implications of our findings for theories of minority group symbolic representation and democratic citizenship more broadly.

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Political representation; LGBTQ; transgender; candidates; public opinion

Representative democracy is based on the premise that elected officials can and will represent citizens' aggregated interests. As opposed to a monolith of citizens, interests are often aggregated and centered around groups, especially when groups in society are organized and vocal. From the perspective of organized groups, selecting the candidates for office that will best represent their interests is a challenge that often requires extensive screening by the group. One short-cut that is often used by groups is to support candidates that are actually group members.

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Once a candidate self-identifies as a member of a particular group, voters that also belong to that group similarly have an information short-cut to understanding which candidate might be more supportive of group interests. In addition, some sympathetic voters that do not belong to the candidate's group might use that candidate's group membership to determine that the candidate shares similar values and is therefore worthy of support. However, for the voter that does not belong to the group, candidate group-identification might provide a short-cut to presumptions that the candidate does not support the interests of out-group members.

Our project examines whether group membership affects the decision-making process for voters by analyzing support for hypothetical transgender candidates running for political office. We employ data from a nationally representative survey of adults to specifically examine if we can develop a profile of a voter that is more likely to support a transgender candidate and whether voters likely supportive of a lesbian or gay candidate would also support a transgender candidate.

Our project begins with a brief review of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) candidates for public office.[1] We then review the literature on support for nontraditional candidates for public office in order to develop a model of individual support for LGBT candidates. From there, we analyze support for transgender candidates for local, state, and national offices by contrasting support for a hypothetical transgender candidate to support for a hypothetical gay or lesbian candidate.

Our analysis suggests that likely supporters of transgender candidates have a similar profile to those that are more likely to support gay and lesbian candidates, with some important distinctions, including voter characteristics that are not typically assessed in national surveys. We discuss the implications of our findings for transgender candidates and the potential for the symbolic representation of transgender people through the election of members of the group.

LGBT candidates and support for nontraditional candidates

Since the first openly gay and lesbian candidates ran for office in the 1960s, the number of LGBT candidates has grown considerably (from a handful to more than 100 each election cycle in the 2000s), and beginning in the 1990s these candidates were increasingly successful in their electoral contests (Button, Wald, and Rienzo 1999; Haider-Markel 2010; Rayside 1998; Reynolds 2013; Smith and Haider-Markel 2002). Nevertheless, very few transgender candidates have run for office and even fewer have been successful (Casey and Reynolds 2015; Taylor and Haider-Markel 2014). The vast majority of LGBT candidates have been gay men and women running as Democrats for local offices and state legislatures, but several have made successful bids for U.S. House seats and the Senate (Haider-Markel and Bright 2014; Reynolds 2013).

Research suggests that LGBT candidates may face similar discriminatory attitudes as those historically confronted by African-Americans, Latinos, and women. Likewise, voters might perceive that candidates belonging to nontraditional candidate groups are more liberal, even in nonpartisan elections (McDermott 1997). And following Pitkin's (1967) logic of symbolic representation, we also posit that candidates representing outsider groups might generate opposition based on the symbolic nature of their presence as mainstream candidates among members of traditionally dominant groups.

Although there is some evidence that voters discriminated against female and minority candidates in the 1960s and 1970s (Baxter and Lansing 1980), more recent research suggests many voters are more open to nontraditional candidates (Dolan 1997, 2004; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Lawless and Fox 2005; Thomas and Wilcox 2014). Experimental and survey research supports this perspective. Ekstrand and Eckert's (1981) experimental analysis on support for female candidates also found that hypothetical female candidates faced no significant disadvantage (Hayes and Lawless 2016). Zipp and Plutzer's (1985) analysis also suggests that neither male nor female voters are predisposed to vote for or against a qualified female candidate. Additionally, studies employing representative survey data indicate that many American adults are not predisposed to oppose female candidates for most offices (Dolan 2004; Hayes and Lawless 2016; Plutzer and Zipp 1996; Thomas and Wilcox 2014; Welch and Sigelman 1982).

This is not to say that nontraditional candidates are treated equally; voters do tend to hold gender stereotypes that can disadvantage women (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Dolan 2004; Flammang 1997; Fox 1997; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Kahn 1996; Sanbonmatsu 2002), and racial and ethnic minority candidates tend to face more discrimination and stereotypes than have women (Barker, Jones, and Tate 1999; Dawson 1994; Philpot and Walton 2007; Reeves 1997; Sigelman and Welch 1984; Williams 1989). Nevertheless, analysis of survey data and experiments suggests that discriminatory voting against real and hypothetical minority candidates has declined. For example, Highton's (2004) analysis of exit poll data reveals no evidence that Democratic or Republican voters discriminated against black U.S. House candidates in the 1990s. In studies employing hypothetical black candidates, researchers have found some evidence that white voters are less willing to support black candidates over similarly positioned white candidates (Kinder and Sears 1981; Moskowitz and Stroh 1994; Reeves 1997; Sears, Citrin, and Kosterman 1987; Sigelman et al. 1995; Sigelman and Sigelman 1982; Terkildsen 1993), but the pattern is not consistent across studies.

We can suggest that most adults would not likely refuse to support a candidate of his or her own party on the basis of race or gender. Even assuming that some amount of respondents are providing socially acceptable answers, a dramatic percentage of adults now indicate that they would be willing to support a woman (92%), Black (92%), Hispanic (91%), or Jewish (91%) candidate for president if their party nominated the candidate and the candidate shared their views (Saad 2015). By comparison, only 74% said they would vote for a gay or lesbian candidate and about 60% said they would vote for a Muslim or atheist candidate (Saad 2015), but these percentages have increased significantly in the past 15 years.

Because at least some voters will reject a candidate based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and even more would reject a gay or lesbian candidate, it seems likely that voters might display even less support for a transgender candidate given that the public has warmer feelings toward gays and lesbians compared to transgender people (authors forthcoming). To understand this pattern, we need to turn to what we know about gay and lesbian candidates as people likely evaluate transgender candidates similarly because of the LGBT advocacy coalition (Taylor and Lewis 2014) and the overlap in attitudes on gay and transgender rights (Flores 2015).

Findings from experimental research on support for hypothetical gay and lesbian candidates indicate that respondents tended to provide lower evaluations of lesbian and gay

candidates than heterosexual candidates and were less likely to suggest they would vote for these candidates (Golebiowska 2001; Golebiowska and Thomsen 1999; Herrick and Thomas 1999). In one study, support for a gay male candidate that conformed to a gay stereotype was even lower than for other gay candidates (Golebiowska 2001). Even so, Tadlock and Gordon's (2003) experimental study that employed fictional news accounts of lesbian and gay candidates found that gay and lesbian candidates were *not* less likely to be supported and might even be preferred over heterosexual candidates with the same qualities, but this finding is in conflict with findings from general population surveys.

Research analyzing survey data suggests that a significant portion of the population would not be inclined to support a gay or lesbian candidate for a variety of offices, even if the candidate shared their views on issues. For example, one analysis of national polling data from 1994 to 2006 consistently shows that about 25% of adults would oppose a gay or lesbian candidate for state or national legislative seats (Haider-Markel 2010). Similar analysis of 2008 survey data asking about a gay or lesbian candidate for president, vice president, or the U.S. Senate finds that about one-quarter of respondents would not support such a candidate (Haider-Markel and Bright 2014), and Doan and Haider-Markel (2010) found similar opposition to a gay or lesbian congressional candidate in a 2003 survey. Internal survey data from Tammy Baldwin's 2012 U.S. Senate campaign in Wisconsin reveal an equivalent pattern for an openly lesbian candidate. One poll conducted by her campaign revealed that 60% of respondents would support a gay or lesbian candidate for public office, while 25% said they would oppose a gay candidate and 15% were unsure. Among Democrats in the poll support for a gay candidate was 80% (Haider-Markel and Bright 2014).

Across the studies about gay and lesbian candidates since the 1990s, about 25% of respondents consistently indicated that they would be unlikely to support a gay or lesbian candidate, regardless of the office. Interestingly, the basic profile of who is most likely to oppose a gay candidate is very similar to the profile of those likely to oppose a female, Black, or Hispanic candidate – older, white, male, with less education, lower income, more religious, and is a conservative leaning Republican (Haider-Markel and Bright 2014). In short, extant research reveals a profile of a voter that is more likely to support conservative Republican candidates for office over liberals or Democrats, irrespective of sexual orientation, race, gender, or ethnicity.

In addition to these demographic characteristics and political leanings, research suggests that individual emotions, including propensity toward discomfort or disgust sensitivity, might influence attitudes toward groups (Crawford, Inbar, and Maloney 2014), and we infer support for candidates that represent a group. Indeed, Pitkin's (1967, 100) notion of an emotional response to symbolic representation seems apt. Individuals have emotional responses toward their elected representatives and should therefore have emotional responses to political candidates seeking to represent them. If a representative or a candidate is from an individual's group, it would seem more likely that a positive emotional response would follow. But for a candidate not from an individual's group, negative emotions might follow.

Indeed, Crawford, Inbar, and Maloney (2014) argue that disgust is associated with negative attitudes toward gay people and gay rights because gays are viewed as a low-status out-group. However, they suggest that propensity toward disgust is also associated with conservative views about sex (see Olatunji 2008). From this perspective, members of

groups that are perceived as threatening traditional sexual morality or purity are more likely to be viewed negatively, while members of groups perceived as upholding traditional sexual morality would be viewed positively. In their test of this argument, Crawford, Inbar, and Maloney (2014) clearly demonstrate that higher disgust sensitivity is associated with negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Given the association of transgender people with the gay and lesbian advocacy (e.g., Taylor and Haider-Markel 2014), we should expect a similar association between disgust sensitivity and negative attitudes toward members of the group. Indeed, Casey's (2016) experimental work found evidence to support this argument with respect to policy preferences about both gay and transgender rights issues (see also authors reference).

Given the linkage between disgust sensitivity and negative attitudes toward a group, it would seem to follow that candidates representing a group perceived as threatening traditional sexual morality is more likely to be viewed negatively by those with higher disgust sensitivity. Disgust sensitivity is often measured using a series of survey questions that are intended to capture the extent to which an individual is averse to stimuli that could be offensive (Kam and Estes 2016). Using this technique, Franks and Scherr's (2014) analysis does indeed suggest that those with higher levels of disgust sensitivity will be less likely to support outsider groups for office, including gay and lesbians as well as atheists and African-Americans.[2] We have no reason to expect this pattern would not be apparent for transgender candidates. In fact, given that transgender people and issues have only recently become more visible to many Americans (Flores 2015; Taylor and Haider-Markel 2014), disgust sensitivity could be even more strongly linked to opposition to transgender candidates than it is to gay or lesbian candidates, controlling for in-group predisposition or political leanings.

Gender nonconformity might also shape voting preferences; individuals that have a stronger sense that they themselves do not conform to typical gender stereotypes might be more or less likely to support particular candidates. For example, a gender nonconforming woman might be more willing to support an LGBT candidate because such a candidate challenges traditional notions of gender and gender roles. It does appear that gender conformity influences voting choices. In their study of voting in Australia, Hatemi et al. (2012) accounted for voter sex and gender identity, primarily using a measure of gender nonconformity. Their analysis suggests that gender identity is a distinct predictor of vote choice beyond sex and political orientation.

Given the pattern of opposition to nontraditional candidates, we should expect that the typical opponent of a transgender candidate would have a similar profile, even though opposition might vary depending on the particular office. In addition, we add to this profile gender identity and disgust sensitivity, which are often not included in national surveys. We turn to our data and its collection before discussing our full design and analysis.[3]

Data and research design

We explore support for transgender candidates by employing data from a national survey on LGBT issues. The survey was designed by the research team and fielded with resources from the University of Toledo, University of Kansas, UCLA's Williams Institute, and Ohio University. The nationally representative survey was conducted via GfK's Knowledge

Panel ($n = 1020$) from October 9 to 11 2015. The GfK panel was drawn, by probability, from a sampling frame that is derived from the U.S. Postal Service's Computerized Delivery Sequence File. This address-based sample can avoid some of the coverage problems associated with cell phone only households (e.g., different area codes, call screening). Additionally, respondents cannot opt-in to this panel. For respondents lacking internet service or equipment, GfK supplies it (GfK n.d.). Our Gfk sample was completed by adults 18 and older. Nearly equal numbers of men and women completed the survey questionnaire. To ensure national representativeness, the raw data in the GfK sample were weighted by their proprietary system that factors in several variables: age, sex, education, race, household income, internet status, and geographic region.

The survey questionnaire included questions on public attitudes on transgender people, transgender-related policy issues, and transgender political candidates.[4] For comparison purposes, we also asked about feelings toward gay people and various gay rights policies. Transgender-centric questions in the surveys were modeled on similar gay rights or transgender rights questions from other sources whenever possible. These include a 2011 Public Religion Research Institute Survey and various iterations of the General Social Survey and American National Election Studies. We also reviewed a similar study by researchers at the University of Illinois-Springfield (Kirzinger and Pierceson 2015).

Concept measurement

Our survey included questions to measure all of the above mentioned individual characteristics of interest plus additional questions not typically asked in national surveys. To assess support for LGBT candidates, we asked each respondent about potential support for hypothetical gay or lesbian candidates and transgender candidates for a set of political offices. We asked:

> If an openly (gay or lesbian)/(transgender) candidate were to run for an office and they were the candidate that most shared your views on political issues, how likely would you be to vote for that candidate in a (1) city council race, (2) state legislative race, (3) Governor's race, or (4) U.S. House race.[5]

Responses were assigned values of (4) definitely vote for, (3) probably vote for, (2) probably vote for someone else, and (1) definitely vote for someone else.[6]

The descriptive statistics for candidate support are displayed in Table 1. The distribution of responses for LGBT candidates reveals that support differs little across the political races for different offices, from city council to U.S. House, with some variation of a percentage point or two. In each race, the hypothetical gay or lesbian candidate would likely be supported by at least 60% of respondents. About 5% of respondents did not provide an answer to each question.

Meanwhile, transgender candidates would likely receive somewhat lower levels of support – around 54%, suggesting that a transgender candidate is perceived by more respondents as an outsider, even though the question is phrased to suggest that the candidate agrees with the respondent's issue positions. Given lower levels of awareness about transgender people, and that feelings toward transgender people and transgender rights are somewhat more negative than for gays and lesbians, it is not surprising that support for a transgender candidate is lower. With a survey margin of error at about four

Table 1: Support for gay/lesbian and transgender political candidates, 2015.

If an openly (gay or lesbian)/(transgender) candidate were to run for an office and they were the candidate that most shared your views on political issues, how likely would you be to vote for that candidate in a City Council Race			
Gay or lesbian		*Transgender*	
Definitely vote for	28%	Definitely vote for	24%
Probably vote for	33%	Probably vote for	32%
Probably vote for someone else	19%	Probably vote for someone else	23%
Definitely vote for someone else	15%	Definitely vote for someone else	17%
DK/Refused	5%	DK/Refused	5%
If an openly (gay or lesbian)/(transgender) candidate were to run for an office and they were the candidate that most shared your views on political issues, how likely would you be to vote for that candidate in a State Legislative Race			
Gay or lesbian		*Transgender*	
Definitely vote for	27%	Definitely vote for	24%
Probably vote for	33%	Probably vote for	30%
Probably vote for someone else	19%	Probably vote for someone else	24%
Definitely vote for someone else	16%	Definitely vote for someone else	17%
DK/Refused	5%	DK/refused	5%
If an openly (gay or lesbian)/(transgender) candidate were to run for an office and they were the candidate that most shared your views on political issues, how likely would you be to vote for that candidate in a Governor's Race			
Gay or lesbian		*Transgender*	
Definitely vote for	27%	Definitely vote for	24%
Probably vote for	32%	Probably vote for	30%
Probably vote for someone else	19%	Probably vote for someone else	24%
Definitely vote for someone else	16%	Definitely vote for someone else	17%
DK/refused	5%	DK/refused	5%
If an openly (gay or lesbian)/(transgender) candidate were to run for an office and they were the candidate that most shared your views on political issues, how likely would you be to vote for that candidate in a U.S. House Race			
Gay or lesbian		*Transgender*	
Definitely vote for	27%	Definitely vote for	23%
Probably vote for	33%	Probably vote for	31%
Probably vote for someone else	19%	Probably vote for someone else	24%
Definitely vote for someone else	16%	Definitely vote for someone else	17%
DK/refused	5%	DK/refused	5%

Note: Compiled by the authors based on a weighted national probability sample survey of 1000 adults conducted by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015; figures may not equal 100% because of rounding. Order of questions randomized on questionnaire.

percentage points, the difference is fairly small. However, a margin of five or six percentage points in an electoral count could easily mean defeat for a candidate.

Although we do expect that the pattern of who is more likely to support a transgender candidate to be similar to the profile of the person more likely to support a lesbian or gay candidate, it is clear that a transgender candidate for political office will likely receive less support, all other factors held constant. In a real-world contest, this difference would not be trivial, suggesting that transgender candidates should strategically target where and when to run for office based on the characteristics of the electorate.

Because we observe little variation in the level of office sought by each candidate, we combined responses on the gay and lesbian candidate questions, and separately, on the transgender candidate questions, into two additive scales that are used for the dependent variables in our analysis.[7] Thus, both of our dependent variables potentially range from 4 to 16.

Our primary independent variables are based on fairly standard demographic questions that are often asked in surveys of adults. Our main interest is on indicators of group affiliation, including sex, party affiliation, ideology, race, religiosity, and sexual orientation. However, given past research on support for outsider candidates, we included controls for education, income, parental status, age, and region of residence (see the Appendix

for a listing of variables and measurement). We expect that women, Democrats, liberals, the less religious, and nonheterosexuals will be more likely to support LGBT candidates, with the influence of these variables most apparent for transgender candidates. Our expectations for the control variables are weaker, but we do expect that more educated and higher income respondents will be more likely to be supportive of LGBT candidates.

Our measures of disgust sensitivity and gender (identity) nonconformity are more nuanced. We measure disgust sensitivity with an additive scale of four questions that begin with:

> Please tell us how the following statements describe you. (Select only one response for each.) (1) I never let any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public washroom, (2) I probably would not go to my favorite restaurant if I found out that the cook had a cold, (3) I use hand sanitizer on a daily basis, and (4) I am perfectly fine with drinking water from the same cup as an acquaintance of mine (reverse coded).

The potential responses were (with values): "(4) Extremely Like Me, (3) Very Much like Me, (2) Somewhat Like Me, and (1) Not Like Me."[8] With the reverse coding of the fourth question, these items were scaled based on a Cronbach alpha score of .60.[9] The questions come from the hygiene subset measuring disgust (Haidt, McCauely, and Rozin 1993). We expect that respondents that score higher on disgust sensitivity will be less likely to support a LGBT candidate, but this should be more apparent for a transgender candidate because transgender candidates are more novel than gay or lesbian candidates.

In their analysis of gender identity's influence on voting preference, Hatemi et al. (2012) include a measure that assesses gender nonconformity in adults. We employ the main components of this concept in our analysis based on four (yes, agree/no, disagree) questions asked of self-identified females and four questions of self-identified males. For females the questions were: (1) "In many ways, I feel more similar to men than women, (2) I feel like part of me is female and part of me is male, (3) I often think that I would rather be a man," and (4) People think that I should act more feminine than I do. For males the questions were: (1) In many ways, I feel more similar to women than men, (2) I feel like part of me is male and part of me is female, (3) I often think that I would rather be a woman, and (4) "I don't feel very masculine." For each group yes responses are coded as two and no responses are coded as one. Male and female responses were used to generate an additive index with higher values indicating less gender conformity.[10] Given the patterns observed by Hatemi et al. (2012), we expect that respondents that score higher on gender nonconformity will be more likely to support LGBT candidates, and this should be somewhat more pronounced for female respondents considering transgender candidates.

Results and analysis

Our analysis proceeds in three parts. First, using ordinary least squares regression, we provide base models of support for a gay or lesbian candidate and support for a transgender candidate using the additive indices of the four different political races for each described above. Next, we expand the models to include our measure of respondent gender nonconformity, and finally we subset the data to examine only those respondents

that self-identified as female to assess the potential interaction effect of sex with gender nonconformity. We conduct a separate analysis of female respondents because previous research consistently shows that women respond differently than men to gay and lesbian candidates (Haider-Markel 2010; Herek 2002), as well as on LGBT equality generally (Brewer 2008; Flores 2015; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Lewis 2003; Mucciaroni 2008). For each of the models, we standardize each of the variables on a zero to one scale and estimate ordinary least squares regression coefficients for ease of interpretation.

Table 2 displays the results of the first model, which includes all of the variables of interest, as well as the control variables, but excludes the gender nonconformity variable. The results are fairly consistent with our expectations – the more educated, higher income respondents have higher support for LGBT candidates, while Republicans, heterosexuals, the more religious, those with higher disgust sensitivity, and conservatives tend to be less supportive an LGBT candidate. The pattern is similar whether the candidate was gay/lesbian or transgender, but there are some notable differences.

In particular, transgender candidates are given more support by women than are gay/lesbian candidates, and based on the size of standardized coefficients, ideology and party

Table 2. Predicting support for a gay or lesbian and transgender candidate, 2015.

Independent variables	Vote for gay/lesbian candidate	Vote for transgender candidate
Female	.027	.066*
	(.021)	(.021)
White	.027	.032
	(.025)	(.025)
Education	.241**	.164**
	(.043)	(.043)
Income	.114*	.088#
	(.050)	(.049)
Young children	−.017	−.024
	(.024)	(.024)
Party ^ Republican	−.116**	−.120**
	(.040)	(.039)
Heterosexual	−.157**	−.124*
	(.051)	(.051)
South	−.040#	−.012
	(.022)	(.022)
Church attendance	−.223**	−.211**
	(.033)	(.034)
Easily disgusted	−.156**	−.152**
	(.044)	(.044)
Age	−.001	.013
	(.041)	(.042)
Ideology ^ conservative	−.236**	−.341**
	(.052)	(.053)
Constant	.890**	.873**
	(.064)	(.065)
R-square	.28	.29
F	25.74**	26.57**
N	809	807

Note: Coefficients are OLS regression coefficients; all variables standardized to zero–one scales. Dependent variables are summed scale support for a hypothetical candidate for four different offices. The data are from a national probability sample survey of 1000 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015.

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, #$p < .10$; two-tailed test.

identification played a larger role in the transgender candidate model while religiosity, education, income, and sexual orientation played a somewhat larger role in the gay/lesbian candidate model.[11]

Given the differential role of respondent sex across the models, we added our gender nonconformity variable to the models displayed in Table 3. Adding the gender nonconformity variable changes very little in the models. Again we see that Republicans, conservatives, heterosexuals, the more religious, those with higher disgust sensitivity, and conservatives give less support for a gay/lesbian or transgender candidate, while women, the more educated, higher income respondents provide more support for a transgender candidate. Gender nonconformity is not statistically significant in a two-tailed test in either of the models but is in the expected direction (positive) and in the transgender model the coefficient is significantly larger than the standard error term. In a one-tailed test, gender nonconformity is associated with supporting a transgender candidate at the .05 level.[12]

Because gender nonconformity and gender were such powerful predictors of vote choice in the Hatemi et al. (2012) study, our final models explore respondent sex and

Table 3. Predicting support for a gay or lesbian and transgender candidates, with gender identity, 2015.

Independent variables	Vote for gay/lesbian candidate	Vote for transgender candidate
Female	.025	.060*
	(.022)	(.022)
White	.029	.035
	(.025)	(.026)
Education	.239**	.161**
	(.043)	(.043)
Income	.117*	.096#
	(.049)	(.049)
Young children	−.017	−.024
	(.024)	(.024)
Party ^ Republican	−.114**	−.117**
	(.040)	(.040)
Heterosexual	−.153**	−.112*
	(.052)	(.052)
South	−.040#	−.012
	(.022)	(.022)
Church attendance	−.224**	−.211**
	(.034)	(.034)
Easily disgusted	−.153**	−.145**
	(.044)	(.045)
Age	−.002	.015
	(.042)	(.042)
Ideology ^ conservative	−.237**	−.340**
	(.052)	(.053)
Gender nonconformity	.050	.147
	(.108)	(.108)
Constant	.861**	.782**
	(.094)	(.094)
R-square	.28	.29
F	23.71**	24.68**
N	808	806

Note: Coefficients are OLS regression coefficients; all variables standardized to zero–one scales. Dependent variables are summed scale support for a hypothetical candidate for four different offices. The data are from a national probability sample survey of 1000 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015.

**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, #$p < .10$; two-tailed test.

Table 4. Predicting support for a gay or lesbian and transgender candidates, with gender identity, female only.

Independent variables	Vote for gay/lesbian candidate	Vote for transgender candidate
White	.039	.020
	(.036)	(.035)
Education	.210**	.130*
	(.064)	(.062)
Income	.041	.025
	(.071)	(.070)
Young children	−.026	−.018
	(.033)	(.032)
Party ^ Republican	−.097#	−.088
	(.055)	(.054)
Heterosexual	−.127	−.120
	(.081)	(.078)
South	−.038	−.030
	(.032)	(.031)
Church attendance	−.199**	−.210**
	(.048)	(.047)
Easily disgusted	−.133*	−.154**
	(.062)	(.061)
Age	.061	.063
	(.060)	(.058)
Ideology ^	−.288**	−.367**
conservative	(.075)	(.075)
Gender nonconformity	.243#	.248#
	(.137)	(.133)
Constant	.789**	.857**
	(.139)	(.135)
R-square	.27	.30
F	12.37**	14.14**
N	411	408

Note: Coefficients are OLS regression coefficients; all variables standardized to zero–one scales. Dependent variables are summed scale support for a hypothetical candidate for four different offices. The data are from a national probability sample survey of 1000 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9to 11, 2015.
** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$; two-tailed test.

gender nonconformity more deeply by dividing the data by respondent sex and effectively interacting female respondents with all of the variables, including gender nonconformity. Here we anticipate that gender nonconformity may influence women differently from men. Table 4 replicates the models in Table 3 but only estimated with female respondents.

The results in Table 4 are quite similar to those reported in the earlier tables, but notable is the fact that for female respondents the gender nonconformity variable breaks the one-tailed statistical significance test at a probability of <.05 (two-tailed test in table <.10). This suggests that female respondents that conform less to gender norms are more supportive of gay/lesbian and transgender candidates, all other factors held constant.[13] The effect is somewhat stronger for transgender candidates. We expect that if we had been able to employ the full battery of gender identity questions (including childhood and adult gender identity) used by Hatemi et al. (2012), the relationship observed might be more robust. Nevertheless, our results fit our intuition that gender nonconformists are more likely to support LGBT candidates, and the relationship appears to be most robust for self-identified females.

Conclusion

Representation in a democratic political system is a challenge even when a group has a cohesive set of interests and issue priorities. That challenge becomes more difficult for groups that represent small minorities of the voting population, even when they are able to put forward candidates from their group. A large body of research has documented the hurdles faced by nontraditional candidates for office and our project seeks to contribute to that knowledge by examining support for hypothetical transgender candidates running for a variety of political offices. We employ data from a unique 2015 national survey that queried American adult respondents about hypothetical gay, lesbian, and transgender candidates for different political offices. Our analysis and findings allow us to draw several important conclusions about support for LGBT candidates.

First, our findings indicate that about 30% of adults would likely oppose a gay or lesbian candidate for local, state, or national office. Indeed, the level of office matters little to supporters or opponents. Opposition to a transgender candidate is somewhat higher at around 35–40%, but for all LGBT candidates a majority of respondents indicate that they would probably vote for the candidate if the candidate shared their views on issues. This finding is consistent with past research on LGB candidates (Haider-Markel 2010; Haider-Markel and Bright 2014) and suggests that the hurdles faced by LGB candidates and transgender candidates are not insurmountable. However, transgender candidates are likely to face more opposition than are LGB candidates and the margins are large enough to potentially mean the difference between victory and defeat.

Second, the profile of the voter most likely to support a transgender candidate is very similar to the profile of a voter that is more likely to support other nontraditional candidates, especially a lesbian or gay candidate. The profile is an educated, Democrat and liberal leaning, more affluent, and less religious. Transgender candidates were also more likely to be supported by women. This profile is highly consistent with a voter that would lean toward voting for a Democratic candidate in a given race, and since most LGBT candidates for office run as Democrats (Haider-Markel 2010), it appears that voters that would be inclined to vote against a LGBT candidate would likely not vote for most Democratic candidates. As such, the potential opponents of a transgender candidate, who are also likely opponents of LGB candidates, are not likely to be much of a factor in actual elections if the candidate runs as a Democrat with a left-leaning electorate. For transgender candidates running as Republicans, the electoral picture is bleaker. Thus, transgender candidates need to be especially strategic in choosing where and when to run for office, at least in the near term.

Third, our analysis of support for LGBT candidates accounted for respondent characteristics that are less commonly included in such an analysis, including the role of emotions and gender nonconformity. We examined the role of emotions by asking a series of questions that are designed to measure disgust sensitivity. The findings are compelling – those with higher disgust sensitively are significantly less likely to support a gay/lesbian candidate or a transgender candidate, all other factors held constant. Although less than 20% of respondents in our poll revealed high levels of disgust sensitively, it is clear that individuals that can easily be made to feel uncomfortable will be less likely to support nontraditional candidates such as transgender political candidates.

Our findings on gender nonconformity are less clear, but do suggest there is a need to include more gender nonconformity-related questions on social and political survey questionnaires. Our analysis revealed that our additive index of gender nonconformity in adulthood was not a statistically significant predictor of support for an LGBT candidate, but in the model predicting support for a transgender candidate gender nonconformity did approach the one-tailed statistical significance threshold. And in our final set of models, we estimated the equations using only female respondents; in this case, gender nonconformity did reach the one-tailed threshold, indicating that women reporting higher levels of gender nonconformity are more likely to support an LGBT candidate, all other factors held constant. This, combined with the fact that female respondents were more likely to support a transgender candidate, suggests to us that the role of sex and gender in explaining support for nontraditional political candidates is an important consideration for future researchers in this and other areas. In short, researchers should include more nuanced measures of gender nonconformity that can be interacted with the sex of respondents to provide a fuller picture of how gender and sex shape attitudes.

Finally, from our findings we infer that the relatively novel transgender candidate will find electorally significant levels of support, especially in districts that lean Democratic and have a more highly educated population. This means that the representation of transgender group interests through the electoral process is possible, even though challenging. If the pattern of support for transgender candidates tends to evolve in a pattern similar to what has been observed for female, Black, Hispanic, and LGB candidates, we should expect that overt opposition to transgender candidates will decrease over time, enhancing the opportunities for representation.

Although voter opposition to a transgender candidate is not trivial, at roughly 30% of potential voters, the fact that significant majorities of adults would be at least somewhat likely to support a like-minded transgender candidate for most offices provides hope for truly realized democratic citizenship for transgender Americans. It is clear that most adults would not simply reject a transgender candidate, thus meaning the halls of power are accessible. The symbolic value of electoral victory for a sense of group legitimacy and empowerment is difficult to assess, but likely profound for some group members. As Harvey Milk argued during his failed run for a California state legislative seat in 1976 " … a gay official is needed not only for our protection, but to set an example for younger gays that says the system works … we've got to give them hope" (Shilts 1982, 143).

And beyond the powerful symbolism of a successful transgender candidate, we do know that increasing descriptive representation for a group is strongly associated with increasing substantive representation in the policy-making process (Bratton 2002; Casey and Reynolds 2015; Haider-Markel 2007, 2010). The policy-making process may already be difficult for transgender rights (Flores, Herman, and Mallory 2015). Thus, previous research and our findings lead us to expect that strategic transgender candidates will be successful in electoral politics and will enhance the representation of transgender interests in public policy.

Notes

1. Although our discussion includes bisexual candidates, our analysis does not employ data from questions about bisexual candidates. However, given existing research on gay and

lesbian candidates, we have no reason to believe voters would make a significant distinction between a gay versus bisexual candidate.

2. Kam and Estes (2016) find that higher disgust sensitively is associated with support for detaining immigrants and opposing same-sex marriages, which is consistent with a pattern of negative reactions to outsider groups (see also Crawford, Inbar, and Maloney 2014).
3. Of course, affect toward LGBT people also strongly shapes attitudes toward LGBT rights (Herek 2000) and would shape support for LGBT candidates. Preliminary analysis of our data reveals this to be the case; a simple correlation between a score on the gay and lesbian feeling thermometer and support for a gay or lesbian candidate is .66 and a correlation between a score on the transgender feeling thermometer and support for a transgender candidate is .67. We do not include feeling thermometer scores in our analysis, because it is so strongly correlated with other variables in the model that we are unable to assess the independent influence of other variables of interest.
4. Before any of the transgender questions were asked on the survey questionnaire, respondents were exposed to the following information:

> Gender identity refers to how a person identifies their own gender (as a man, woman, or some other label). For many people their gender identity may not match their birth sex. For example, a man may identify more as female, or a woman may identify more as male. Transgender is a general term for people whose gender identity or expression is different from their birth sex. Some transgender people may undergo gender transition with medical procedures like hormone therapy or surgery (often commonly called a "sex change"), but others do not seek such medical assistance. Transgender includes groups you might have heard of before, including transsexuals, cross-dressers, or gender queer people.

5. We programed the survey to randomize whether a respondent was asked about a gay/lesbian candidate or a transgender candidate first. We also randomized the ordering of the offices sought by the hypothetical candidate.
6. As noted in Table 1, about 5% of the sample refused to answer these questions or indicated "don't know." These respondents were not included in the multivariate analysis.
7. The Cronbach alpha inter-reliability score on the gay and lesbian candidate questions was .9939 and .9935 on the transgender candidate questions; these correlations suggest there was no statistical difference in responses based on the level of political office the candidate was seeking.
8. The questions were asked in a randomized order.
9. The fourth question in this group had the largest disparity from the others. However, removing this question and relying on a three question scale did little to improve the alpha score and did not substantively change the results presented in our analysis.
10. The Cronbach alpha inter-reliability score on female gender conformity questions was .73 and the alpha for the male questions was .77.
11. We note that only the differences between female, education, and ideology were statically significant at the $p > .05$ level. We tested for statistically significant differences in coefficients for the same independent variable across each model by estimating a seemingly unrelated regression equation that included the equations for each model, and then tested whether the parameters were significantly different between the models for each independent variable (lincom in STATA).
12. The differential performance of the gender nonconformity variable across the two models is also statically significant according to the linear combination test described above.
13. Estimating the models with male respondents only does not reveal any notable results, perhaps because the male respondents revealed almost no gender nonconformity.

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Appendix

Question wording and descriptive statistics.

Sex	
0 Male	48.4%
1 Female	51.6%
Race: white (based on two questions, coded one white, zero non-white)	
1 White (non-Hispanic)	65.7%
0 Black (non-Hispanic)	11.6%
0 Other (non-Hispanic)	6.3%
0 Hispanic	15.2%
0 2+ races (non-Hispanic)	1.2
Education (highest level of education achieved)	
1 Less than high school graduate	12.4%
2 High school graduate	29.6%
3 Some college	18.1%
4 Associate degree	10.7%
5 Bachelor's degree	17.3%
6 Master's degree	8.8%
7 Professional or Ph.D.	3.1%
Total household income for 2014 (mean $70.7K)	
1 Less than $25K	17.9%
2 $25k to $49.9K	22.5%
3 $50K to 74.9K	18.4
4 $75k +	41.2
Parent with children under 18 living at home (mean of children, including none: 0.52)	
1 Yes	28.5
0 No	71.5
Party identification	
1 Strong Democrat	16.5%
2 Not strong Democrat	13.8%
3 Leans Democrat	20.1%
4 Independent	5.0%
5 Leans Republican	17.7%
6 Not strong Republican	12.3%
7 Strong Republican	14.7%
Sexual orientation	
0 Gay or lesbian	1.7%
1 Straight, that is, not gay	94.5%
0 Bisexual	1.7%
0 Something else	0.9%
Region of residence (GfK coded)	
0 Northeast	18.3%
0 Midwest	21.4
1 South	37.4%
0 West	22.9%
Church attendance: "Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services … "	
1 Never	26.7%
2 Seldom	21.7%
3 A few times a year	14.6%
4 Once or twice a month	8.4%

(*Continued*)

Appendix Continued.

5 Once a week	18.2%
6 Or, more than once a week?	8.6%

Disgust sensitivity; additive scale of four questions: "Please tell us how the following statements describe you … "

I never let any part of my body touch the toilet seat in a public washroom	
(4) Extremely Like Me,	18.4%
(3) Very Much Like Me,	14.6%
(2) Somewhat Like Me,	24.5%
(1) Not Like Me	40.0%
I probably would not go to my favorite restaurant if I found out that the cook had a cold	
(4) Extremely Like Me,	17.7%
(3) Very Much Like Me,	18.7%
(2) Somewhat Like Me,	30.8%
(1) Not Like Me	30.2%
I use hand sanitizer on a daily basis,	
(4) Extremely Like Me,	16.6%
(3) Very Much Like Me,	16.0%
(2) Somewhat Like Me,	25.1%
(1) Not Like Me	39.5%
I am perfectly fine with drinking water from the same cup as an acquaintance of mine (reverse coded)	
(1) Extremely Like Me,	11.7%
(2) Very Much Like Me,	18.7%
(3) Somewhat Like Me,	27.5%
(4) Not Like Me	39.5%

Age in years (mean 46.8)

1 18–24	12.4%
2 25–34	17.8%
3 35–44	16.7%
4 45–54	15.7%
5 55–64	18.9%
6 65+	18.5%

Ideology: "In general do you think of yourself as … ."

1 Extremely liberal	3.4%
2 Liberal	14.5%
3 Slightly liberal	9.6%
4 Moderate, middle of the road	35.8%
5 Slightly conservative	11.3%
6 Conservative	18.3%
7 Extremely conservative	4.8%

Gender nonconformity; additive index based on four (yes, agree (2)/no, disagree (1)) questions asked of self-identified females and four questions of self-identified males

	Yes	No
Females		
(1) In many ways, I feel more similar to men than women,	14.3%	83.8%
(2) I feel like part of me is female and part of me is male,	10.9%	87.4%
(3) I often think that I would rather be a man,	6.3%	91.5%
(4) People think that I should act more feminine than I do.	15.1%	83.1%
Males		
(1) In many ways, I feel more similar to women than men,	7.5%	90.8%
(2) I feel like part of me is male and part of me is female,	4.6%	93.4%
(3) I often think that I would rather be a woman,	3.7%	94.4%
(4) I don't feel very masculine.	7.6%	90.4%

Note: Compiled by the authors based on a weighted national probability sample survey of 1020 adults conducted by GfK from October 9to 11, 2015; figures may not equal 100% due to rounding.